BROOKLYN BEFORE

PHOTOGRAPHS, 1971–1983

LARRY RACIOPPO

ESSAYS BY TOM ROBBINS AND JULIA VAN HAAFTEN

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THREE HILLS
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Contents

Preface *vii*

Before the Gold Rush Tom Robbins 1

A Solitary Walker in Brooklyn Julia Van Haaften 13

Fortieth Street 33

Fifteenth Street 53

Changes 81

God and Country 111

Country and God 131

Acknowledgments *155*

Biographies *157*

Larry in the Mirror, 40th Street, 1971

Preface

When I returned to Brooklyn in December 1970, after two years in California as a VISTA volunteer, I had no plans and a thirty-dollar camera I barely knew how to use. I was twenty-two years old and I wanted to become a photographer.

I took a course at the School of Visual Arts, a job with the telephone company, and I began to photograph my family and friends in South Brooklyn. I rented a small storefront in Sunset Park to set up a darkroom where I could make my own black-and-white prints. Eventually I returned to college and graduated. Over the next few years, I completed a master's degree and worked as a cab driver, cameraman, waiter, photographer's assistant, bartender, and carpenter. But no matter what I did to earn money, I kept photographing and printing, gradually creating a body of work rich in the feel of time and place—South Brooklyn in the 1970s.

Looking back now, I smile when I think of my eager young self. I walked around South Brooklyn with my Nikon rangefinder and a handheld light meter, recording each exposure in a 2 x 3-inch spiral notebook. I photographed whatever interested me—from kids playing in the street to old men sitting in bars, from strangers on the subway to my relatives in their homes.

The photographs I made between 1971 and 1983 document South Brooklyn before its gentrification. My parents and most of my aunts, uncles, and cousins lived there. To me, our neighborhood stretched from historic Park Slope to the beginnings of Windsor Terrace and Sunset Park. But I photographed most often between 3rd and 22nd Streets, between 4th to 8th Avenues. I did not know it at the time, but I was recording a part of Brooklyn that would soon be remade by gentrification. Slowly but surely, the residential "gold rush" expanded south from Park Slope. As home prices and rents rose and the pace of sales increased in the1970s, realtors began to call this area the South Slope. The frontier boundary gradually moved toward Green-Wood Cemetery, from 3rd Street to 9th Street to 15th Street and beyond with new neighborhood names like Greenwood Terrace and Greenwood Heights.

But back in 1972, when I rented an apartment on 15th Street between 6th and 7th Avenues, a few blocks from my family's first home, which was demolished in 1954 for the construction of the Prospect Expressway, my neighbors and I had no idea of the changes to come. I went about my work as a photographer and, at home, converted the bedroom to a darkroom and the living room to a small studio for portraits and still lifes. Although I worked as an assistant in a Manhattan photo studio, I became a street photographer long before I knew what that phrase meant. I took frequent walks with my camera from Prospect Park to Green-Wood Cemetery to Sunset Park and photographed religious processions, political parades, and street fairs in South Brooklyn.

These public events were also personal because the social life of my large Italian American family revolved around the Catholic liturgical calendar. Holy days like Christmas and Easter were holidays. Baptisms, first Communions, confirmations, and weddings were religious sacraments celebrated like birthdays—festive dinners with cakes and presents. The Puerto Rican families moving to South Brooklyn in the 1960s and 1970s were Catholics, too, and influenced local churches, such as St. John's on 21st Street, to have a more active liturgy. Street processions, like the one on Good Friday, became more elaborate and much more interesting to me.

Working with both 35mm and 120mm black-and-white film, I continued photographing the everyday life of my family and neighbors. Best of all, I photographed local kids playing the same city games I had played as a boy: football, stickball, punchball, handball, and basketball. I often gave them 8 x 10-inch prints and they called me Picture Man, which I took as a great compliment.

Teens at a Small Fire, 23rd Street, 1976

BROOKLYN BEFORE

Before the Gold Rush

TOM ROBBINS

Somehow it has become accepted wisdom that before New York turned so grand and fabulously costly it was a desperately lousy place to live. This line of thinking holds that, beginning at some point in the mid 1970s, everyone who could got out of town. They didn't come back until things got safe, supposedly some time around Rudy Giuliani's second term in City Hall. Those who couldn't flee the city's terrors lived sullen, fearful lives trapped in darkened apartments in woebegone neighborhoods. The alleged documentary evidence for this claim is a handful of shopworn images: photos of blasted ruins of collapsed tenements, fearful passengers aboard litter-strewn, graffiti-covered subway cars, and of wild crowds storming past shattered shop windows, gleefully hoisting stolen trophies above their heads during the great blackout riot of 1977.

For good measure, even though it is total fiction, inserted into this montage are also images from the movie *The Warriors*, showing youths in leather vests stomping savagely along a darkened street beneath an elevated train. The parade of urban ruin usually culminates with shots of John Lindsay, who is presented as the hopelessly liberal mayor who created this debacle, looking stooped, worried, and apologetic.

Any thinking person understands that, as a summary of life lived in this town in those years, this is complete nonsense. What? You think 6.9 million New York City residents is nobody? That all the seats in Yankee Stadium and Shea went empty? That the IRT and IND trains ran on their tracks all day, all the way up to the northern Bronx and way out to the Atlantic Ocean, just for fun? That the Metropolitan Museum went on lockdown? That Nathan's shuttered its windows because no customers came to Coney Island looking for well-done franks?

No, this bogus portrait of a city begins with small, insecure people who insist that they have turned streets of dread into streets of gold. Never mind that fewer and fewer can afford the price of admission to the city they've crafted. These claims gather momentum every time there is a need to justify

the way things are now: Oh? You don't like it that our greatest parks are now governed by clutches of plutocrats who decide where you can walk or play? You are upset that you can't hold a big rally against a bad war in the vast Sheep Meadow of Central Park because it will hurt the grass? You have a problem that neighborhoods that were once affordable now require a huge paycheck or modest trust fund in order to reside there? Well then, they say, and here politely sympathetic smiles at your naïveté turn to gnashing teeth: *Well then, maybe you'd like to go back to the jungle that was?* And bingo, out comes another photo, this one of a city police car flipped upside down, seemingly trapped by the menacing horde around it.

This fractured history has prevailed for so long now that journalists repeat it as rote. They pick it up from the drumbeat of politicians and developers who invoke this twisted account for their own benefit. The writers should know better, but it makes for an irresistibly simple turn of phrase to invoke the bad old days as counterpoint for all that is shiny and new in Gotham.

Sadly, an entire generation has now come of age having been schooled on this myth. They are not to be blamed for their ignorance. How are they to know that, despite the truly legitimate problems that plagued that era—we speak here of street crime, drug gangs, landlord arson, and noxious boom boxes the size of suitcases—life went on fairly normally? That even though we lacked the blessing of aristocratic conservancies protecting our parks, families still spread blankets on somewhat tattered lawns there, flew balloons, and passed out ice cream to celebrate their children's birthdays?

How are they to know that in the storefronts where people now furiously pump up and down on exercise machines, there once were glorious saloons filled with men and women whose lives of hard work had earned them the right to spend an afternoon tipping glasses of Budweiser and highballs? That along those same stools, under just enough light for the bartender to slice the lemons, passed the wit and wisdom of a city? How can they be expected to know that, after the usual wreckage of Saturday nights, the streets filled on Sunday mornings with families dressed to the nines and headed to church?

How would they know that evenings were more likely to be filled not with menace but with the sound of a *cuatro* strummed by a man in a fedora singing ballads of his home in Puerto Rico? Of congas beaten by young men, their hair exploding in Afros? Or of a saxophone serenading a brick wall, played by a bearded black man in a raincoat, lost in space?

And how to get their heads around the almost cosmic changes to that central determining factor in the quality of urban lives—rent? Back then it could still be had at bargain rates, allowing a choice of where to work, live, and play, often in the kind of spacious realms unthinkable today except for

Guitarist, 40th Street, 1971

the most privileged.

And most importantly, how are they to understand that the sum total of these decidedly modest pleasures often produced a casual and simple joy, one that vastly exceeded whatever fears and cautions accompanied the daily routines of life?

That's the hidden history of many city neighborhoods before the great gold rush descended on them. It's a largely vanished world. Aside from a few pockets that have somehow escaped the gentry's gilded advance, that city has disappeared beneath the waves, leaving few ripples to trace its fate.

If you wanted to choose one neighborhood whose past history has gotten a bad rap thanks to the eagerness of speculators to justify the titanium-level prices charged for even wood-frame houses clad in chipped Permastone, it is the part of Brooklyn now known as Park Slope South.

This is the area that stretches roughly from 9th Street to Green-Wood Cemetery and environs. Back in the 1970s, it was just another part of South Brooklyn, an even larger territory that ranged from the docks of Red Hook to the Verrazano Bridge, a rough geographic designation that swept all of Sunset Park, Bay Ridge, and Bensonhurst under the same banner. It was a vast swath of metropolis, boasting more bars and churches per acre than any other part of the city.

It was also as polyglot as they come, with Italian, Irish, Hispanic, and African American families living above and below each other in walk-up limestone apartment houses. Yes, this ethnic mix fueled occasional jousting between the tribes. They would mark their turf with spray-painted slogans, declaring such delightful sentiments as "Italian Power #1" and "Spics keep out." But if you snapped a picture of the kids hanging out under that graffiti-tagged wall you were more likely than not to capture a grinning Puerto Rican kid next to a couple of equally carefree would-be Italian stallions.

That's the portrait that Larry Racioppo, born and raised in South Brooklyn, managed to take of the neighborhood during the years when it was supposed to have been a mere moonscape, a site of urban apocalypse.

Racioppo's family learned early about neighborhood displacement. Their first apartment was razed to make way for the Prospect Expressway, the highway slashed through the community in the late 1950s by Robert Moses, the city's auto-loving construction czar. The Racioppo clan pushed south along 5th Avenue, closer to the docks along the harbor at the bottom of the hill where his father and uncles worked as longshoremen, hefting cargo and crates from freighters supplying the city's needs. While they lasted, these were good jobs, with good pay, especially for men whose education stopped well short

Family on Christmas Day, 14th Street, 1975

Candy Store Owner, 4th Avenue, 1971

of high school degrees. They were also sometimes dangerous jobs. One uncle was killed when a load collapsed on top of him.

Racioppo was twenty-two when he started taking pictures of his neighbors and the streets they walked. After graduating from Catholic high school, he had briefly considered going to the seminary. Instead he read up on Eastern religions, spent a few years at Fordham, then drifted west to California. On his return, he started looking at the world through the viewfinder of his camera and found ample signs of the Lord's presence all around him.

Racioppo found the holy and miraculous in the living room of his aunt's apartment on 18th Street, above the plastic slipcovered sofa, between the cuckoo clock and the wall-mounted portrait of a kindly Christ. It was in the face of the solemn proprietor of the candy store on 5th Avenue who wore a tie to his job selling Chuckles, Luden's cough drops, and El Producto cigars. It was in the afternoon quiet inside the taverns that graced opposite corners of 7th Avenue and 9th Street. It was in the grass growing through the cracks in the asphalt in front of the swastika-tattooed handball courts. It was also in the lines of laundry strung like naval flags across backyards sprinkled with rose bushes. It was strewn about in the wagon of the last horse-drawn vegetable vendor and to be glimpsed in the statue of the bronzed *Doughboy*, heroically charging the Huns from his pedestal outside the armory on 8th Avenue. Racioppo even found the divine in the wistful look of the girls who hung out near the collapsing stone stairs on Hippie Hill in Prospect Park where the kids went to toke up.

Most of that world, along with the people and images Racioppo brought into focus, are demolished and gone or improved and gentrified to such a degree that much of the history of the place is but a shadow. The crumbling stairs of Hippie Hill are long since cleaned up and repaired. The kids who congregated on that grassy hilltop are gone as well. They weren't really hippies, just local kids with long hair and a love of Bob Dylan and Smokey Robinson, the children of working-class families who lived in the limestones and walkups surrounding the park. Each evening they could be found draped atop the brick wall that lines the park's northern perimeter, drinking tall cardboard containers of beer from Farrell's, the tavern on the other side of Bartel-Pritchard Square, where off-duty cops and iron workers jostled for space at the bar.

Across the street, just north of the square on Prospect Park West—9th Avenue as the older natives insisted—sat the mammoth old Sanders movie house, a grand, Moorish-styled cinema where tickets were purchased at a terrazzo-tiled art deco booth with rounded glass windows and a single broken pane. Inside the cavernous one-screen playhouse, you were often chilled to the bone in the winter, true. Yet for its lack of proper heating the Sanders was

a true temple of entertainment until the last film flickered across its enormous screen in 1978. The soaring old palace stood bricked over and empty for years as investigators unraveled the real estate frauds perpetrated by the crooked ex-police detective who had owned it along with a swath of other Park Slope parcels. Eventually, wiser businessmen opened a multiplex there, one that shoehorned customers into narrow rooms with a mere slice of the old magnificence over their heads.

The Sanders wasn't the only sanctuary shriveled, diminished, or destroyed by hard times. The ranks of worshippers at local churches thinned as well, thanks to the loss of jobs and housing. Despite fewer souls in the pews, on the streets of South Brooklyn crowds of worshippers and gawkers still flocked to the streets to watch the annual Holy Week pageant, following the Christ figure carrying his immense wooden cross, guarded by centurions and led by the mysterious Penitentes in their black hoods and robes. Families, brimming with pride, still celebrated the first Communions of precious young girls in white lace, of boys tucked into their first suits.

The one refuge that survived all assaults and served as a center for those living along its flanks was vast Prospect Park. To Brooklynites, Prospect was the true masterpiece of Frederick Olmstead and Calvert Vaux, more majestic than the much larger Central Park across the river where the landscape geniuses had first practiced their talents. Prospect's graceful meadows, wooded hills, ravines, lake, and ball fields were a haven for all, no admission charged. Whatever dangers might lurk on lonely pathways at night, the park by day and evening was a safe harbor to the neighborhood and its children. No corner was left unexplored. Perched atop a ridge above the long meadow and half-hidden in the woods sat an old Quaker cemetery surrounded by a high chain-link fence. The cemetery predated the park by several decades and was supposed to be off-limits to nonmembers of the faith. But to the youth who roamed the hills the fence was just another dare, and they regularly tunneled under or clambered over it to wander among the plain-faced tombstones.

The bandshell near 9th Street was another vital community retreat, despite the torn posters and spray-painted tags that adorned its curving walls. Today the site boasts concert-quality speakers and professional lighting and the best seats are cordoned off to all but paying customers. Back then, drawn by the sounds, you could slide into a seat unchallenged and hear the likes of Randy Weston, the jazz piano great from Bedford-Stuyvesant who played to cheering crowds there beneath the blurred stars of a Brooklyn summer's night sky. Despite the acknowledged perils of the park after dark, the audience clapped and whistled instead of quaking with fear. Walking en masse, the crowd would exit the park in complete safety and go their different ways

Prospect Park Bandshell, 1976

once out on the sidewalk at Prospect Park West.

Even Shakespeare braved the hazards to put in nighttime appearances in the park. In the otherwise toxic summer of 1977, a hardy group of actors performed *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to a decent-sized crowd at the theater near the lake boathouse. After the performance, theatergoers on their way home passed through a tunnel beneath the park roadway where "In the Still of the Night," sung by a doo-wop quartet making good use of the acoustics, echoed from the arched ceiling.

On the night that summer of 1977 when the lights went out, a single bitter serenade drowned out all others: an endless wail of police and fire sirens sounding in the dark. At first, few of us understood what had happened. It was 9:30 PM and children had just been tucked into bed when lights in the apartments snapped out. Outside, the street lamps had been snuffed out as well. Those with a view of the city saw only shadows where once had been visible familiar landmarks. For the first hour or so, all was innocence: neighbors gathered on the stoops to share the ice cream now melting in powerless refrigerators. Then the sirens began and, for those who lived closest to the avenues, there was the sound of breaking glass. On 7th Avenue, the owner of an all-night bodega who always kept a pistol stuffed in his belt now stood in front of his shop warily holding his weapon.

Over the following twenty-four hours, most of the photos that now define that era were shot. In Brooklyn, looters hit Sunset Park, Flatbush, Bed-Stuy, and, worst of all, Bushwick, which took a generation to recover. The next morning, with the power still out and the trains not running, many took the day off. It was stiflingly hot and, without fans or air conditioners, we denizens of Kings County made the logical decision to head to the beach at the Rockaways. Me and some others piled into a friend's station wagon and headed down Flatbush Avenue, past shattered windows and twisted metal store grates that had been pulled into the street. There were no stoplights and drivers had to pick their way cautiously through every intersection and around every corner, watching for cars that suddenly lurched into the avenue. At the normally hectic junction of Church and Flatbush Avenues, a man stood in the intersection, a self-appointed traffic cop, loudly blowing a whistle and waving his arms. People on the sidewalks cheered him. It was a lone bright spot on an otherwise dismal day. A friend sat in the back seat of the wagon and surveyed the devastation. "This is really bad, really bad," she kept repeating.

Indeed it was. For those already tilting toward leaving the city, the blackout riots pushed them out the door. The racial transition of neighborhoods like Flatbush, already long underway, received a dramatic boost. The scenes

Family in Prospect Park, 1978

of marauding looters amplified the anxiety in a city coping with the terror instilled by a deadly gunman who called himself "Son of Sam." The man whose real name was David Berkowitz had been prowling the streets for two years, targeting young women and men with a .44 caliber revolver. His crime spree haunted the entire city, especially the outer boroughs where he practiced his terror. Berkowitz helped elect a new mayor, Ed Koch. After the riots in July, Koch surged to the front of a crowded Democratic primary thanks to his campaign battle cry for the death penalty, which he carried with him through a frightened city.

Most of us remained, however. And while no one denied the city had been badly wounded, it was still the city where we raised our families. As for Larry Racioppo, a few years after he began snapping pictures of the life around him, he set up shop in the old Ansonia clock factory on 7th Avenue. The sprawling plant takes up the entire block between 12th and 13th Streets and you can trace the neighborhood's entire history right there. After the Ansonia company stopped producing its classic timepieces back in the 1930s, it was replaced by a score of small businesses and light manufacturing firms that prospered behind the looming brick walls. When those companies began slipping away as well in the 1970s, the landlord happily leased space to any one with rent money. Eventually, a developer got hold of the property and created luxury apartments where once there had just been a warren of improvised studios and one-bedrooms, staking the first claim in the gold rush that was soon to come.

But at the point when Racioppo and some pals from the neighborhood took over a roomy studio there, the rent was the usual bargain price. After all, this was Brooklyn. The studio doubled as work space and crash pad. It was also host to many outstanding parties. These were simple affairs involving wine and beer, and a phonograph spinning the memorably urban sounds of the era. They would sing with the record player set at full volume: *Living just enough, just enough for the ci-tyyy*.

The parties ended with a climb to the roof to enjoy something offered by every building perched on South Brooklyn's ridgeline: a shimmering view across the river to the lights of Manhattan, the twin towers of the World Trade Center soaring above all else.

A Solitary Walker in Brooklyn

JULIA VAN HAAFTEN

Street photography is nearly as old as the medium itself, invented in 1839, and limited only by ever-evolving technical capacities of optics and chemistry. "The photographer," culture critic Susan Sontag memorably wrote, "is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising" the urban landscape.[1] The armament of these photographers, their weapon, has of course been a camera.

As perambulating observers, these photographers were, by Sontag's description, aloof outsiders, unemotionally interested in the picturesque, the exotic, or the unusual. This condescending, one-dimensional approach is too narrow to describe Larry Racioppo of the 1970s. As a twenty-something adult he explored the South Brooklyn urban terrain of his youth with a sentimental heart, while mastering overt emotional expression with a steely visual discernment. Yet he, too, was a solitary walker—unaccompanied and on foot, constantly on the lookout for significant, visually arresting subjects.

To describe these camera-bearing, solitary, city-reconnoitering wanderers, Sontag drew on her deep familiarity with French literary history and struck on the concept of the flâneur. The centuries-old word had carried a near-pejorative connotation of idleness and passivity before Charles Baudelaire adopted and popularized it in 1863 for an imaginary ambulatory figure, a "passionate spectator," who memorialized aspects of "modern life" in word and paint.[2] As a result the term "flâneur" took on a new purposefulness, almost an enterprising quality—the very opposite of doing nothing—albeit in the service exclusively of refined and sophisticated aesthetic perceptions.

The word "flâneur" became associated with *photography* in 1867 when another French writer, Victor Fournel, equated the conscious experience of the spectator with an impassioned and new mobile visual image ("un daguerréotype mobile et passionné") of urban experience. His use of the still-young medium of photography to characterize a new kind of experience communicates his intention that the behavior be seen as an aspect of modernity.[3]

A hundred years on, the American wit and writer Cornelia Otis Skinner stated that "flâneur" had no English-language equivalent and could refer only to a "deliberately aimless pedestrian. . . who, being French and therefore frugal, wastes nothing, including his time, which he spends with the leisurely discrimination of a gourmet, savoring the multiple flavors of his city."[4] Yet the English professor and urbanist Dana Brand argued the opposite, that there were also literary flâneurs in nineteenth-century US cities.[5] Chief among them was the poet Walt Whitman, who was so enthralled by the medium of photography that he sat for his portrait dozens of times.[6]

In photography Whitman found a "democracy of vision." By this concept he identified the inherent ability of cameras (and their "operators") to be indiscriminate and all-inclusive. The result was the artistic elevation of content previously thought trivial and insignificant, the existence of beauty overlooked or discounted.[7] Over his long life, the poet's appreciation of photographers grew, as he more deeply understood their role in utilizing the medium to transform the cluttered, undifferentiated reality of the offered world into images conveying ideals and meaning. The photographers' selectivity—of subject, vantage, and point of view—lay at the heart of their transformative art.

Whitman surely admired contemporary stereoscopic views, which encompassed nineteenth-century street photography. Stereoscopic views rose in popularity in the last third of the nineteenth century, becoming a ubiquitous mode of home entertainment to Victorians. With their seductive illusion of depth, stereoviews—two side-by-side, 3-inch-square, almost identical images mounted on 3½ x 7-inch cardstock, viewed through a special double-lens apparatus that rendered a three-dimensionality—were windows on the world, near and far. Because they were relatively inexpensive, they offered ready access to images of an increasingly modern and urban universe. Also called "stereographs," they were produced by the millions for middle-class consumption by often anonymous camera operators working for large production firms. Beyond their ability to transport viewers geographically, stereoviews offered genre studies—images of everyday people and public life, powerfully compelling to contemplate in their human familiarity. In this way, the stereo photographers were also street photographers, on the lookout for interesting common subjects within a specific geography or locale.

By 1900, stereographs became increasingly anonymous and commercial, while large-format personal photography (generally negatives of 5 x 7 inches and greater) developed into a more and more isolated and esoteric endeavor. Such photography entered the world of "art" as a window on interiority and means of personal expression—the very opposite of street photography. Against this background, the now eminent cityscape photographer of Paris, Eugène

School Crossing Guards, 6th Avenue, 1975

Atget, worked solitarily to capture the contemporary urban life around him.[8] In the 1880s, before he took up a camera, Atget briefly edited and drew for a weekly humor magazine presciently titled *Flâneur*. The witty name was an editorial expression of its content, a record by and for those who freely but purposefully wandered and observed the public life of the streets.

Atget was known during his lifetime primarily as a photographer of historic buildings and antiquated views; architectural subjects were his bread-and-butter. But he took pleasure in recording the vibrant and mundane activity of his fellow Parisians—street vendors and buskers, a daytime crowd gathered to stare skyward at an eclipse, or laborers toiling to mend roads. Soon after Atget's death in 1927 his photography was championed by the cosmopolitan art worlds of Paris and New York. For them, his pictures of city businesses and street life symbolized the daily dissonant experience of modern city dwellers, their curiosity on the lookout for picturesque subjects and exotic scenes.

On the American side of the Atlantic, about 1896, the amateur photographer and Staten Island socialite Alice Austen—utterly unaware of Atget in Paris—captured Manhattan street subjects with a fine eye for genre. Her pictures of peddlers, children selling newspapers, workaday carts, passenger conveyance, and other common city scenes were discovered only a half-century later. Slightly earlier, Danish-born Jacob Riis investigated slum living conditions in New York City and occasionally found subjects outdoors, but wandering was not his aim. Similarly, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the great documentarian Lewis Wickes Hine used street photography not as a self-indulgent or exploring flâneur but as a purposeful crusader. His target was the social ills of the industrial urban age, including child labor and exploitation of women—subjects that he could access more readily out in the streets than in forbidden factories.

During the first half of the twentieth century, individual practitioners in Europe as well as the United States—Paul Strand, Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Brassaï, André Kertész, and Helen Levitt among others—worked in Atget's spirit, commandeering the life of the street in their lenses. Their goals were to satisfy personal curiosity and to fill the pages of the new illustrated magazines that were on the rise as more people took an interest in the world as seen in photographs.

As the Great Depression wound down in the late 1930s and into the early years of World War II, America recovered somewhat economically, owing to New Deal efforts in rural areas and war production in industrial and urban ones. The US government, through its still functioning Farm Security Administration publicity unit and the new Office of War Information, continued to assign individual photographers to document the recovery and to

Assasinator's Graffiti, 4th Avenue, 1976

showcase American ingenuity, and they turned increasingly to urban phenomena. The aim was still to capture and record ordinary people and their environments. Conversely, the late 1930s effort of Berenice Abbott as a supervisor in the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project employed a dozen support staff in the service of her own vision as a photographer. Local efforts such as New York's Photo League, before and after World War II, honed an aesthetic appreciation for close visual investigation of the street life of specific neighborhoods.[9] Many photographers on such topical assignments sought to memorialize the intimate scenes of familiar faces and customs close to home. There were staunch independents as well, such as Todd Webb and Harry Callahan, inner-directed cameramen whose work found both commercial and artistic audiences.

The legendary, independent collective photojournalism agency Magnum Photos started in 1947 with four members, among them Cartier-Bresson, whose style reached even greater prominence. The war photographer Robert Capa was another founder, representing Magnum's humanistic photojournalism. As a requirement of membership, Magnum photographers had to share a deep social interest in their subjects and their portrayal. (That requirement is still in force at Magnum today.) In his 1993 memoir, the critic Anatole Broyard captured the general feeling of postwar normalization: "Nineteen forty-six," he wrote as a returning solder, "was a good time—perhaps the best time—in the twentieth century. The war was over and there was a terrific sense of coming back, of repossessing life"[10]

Yet, the optimistic exuberance of the immediate post–WWII years—peace would rule, mankind was one, and economic and social justice gains of the Depression years would continue—was challenged by the rising, and eventual domination, in American public life of a virulent and punitive anti-communism that lasted into the mid-1960s. "Reds" were supposedly everywhere—from the US State Department to Hollywood movie studios—ready to undermine the recently hard-won American way of life. The fearful attitude quashed public discourse about pressing problems of economic fairness and social justice and thwarted a healthy ability to view modern life with ameliorative eyes. The ideals underpinning documentary photography were thus suppressed, perceived as almost anti-American criticism. Abstraction seemed safe to some, while subjective imagery enjoyed a period of artistic vogue through the work of photographers such as Minor White, Frederick Sommer, and even the documentarian Aaron Siskind. Nevertheless, photography of the everyday was further boosted in the mid-1950s by the popularity of Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* exhibition, which toured internationally; the catalog remains in print to this day.

In disquieting psychic opposition stood the work of Swiss-born Robert Frank. His 1955 Guggenheim Fellowship series on the United States, which appeared first in French as *Les Américains* (1958) and the following year in English, gave street photography a new edge and prominence among artists. The Beat Generation immediately recognized Frank's awareness of American hypocrisy and rootless alienation. Photography increasingly seemed the right medium to capture the discordances and inquietude of the affluent and indulgent 1960s. The art world had not yet come around to photography, but, as the Museum of Modern Art photography curator Peter Galassi pointed out, artists had begun "escaping from the studio into the street" only to find "photography . . . was already there."[11] The *Family of Man* exhibition secured for documentary photography a solid place as art in the public eye; street photography would exist as a subgenre—a distinction irrelevant to its practitioners. Audiences of museumgoers and magazine readers also expected photography to be in the street. It took technological developments in photography, a generational change (literally, as baby boomers achieved dominance) in outlook, and a sea change in the parameters of high art for street photography to come into its own. By 1970 American street photography was ready to fully reemerge.[12]

Arguably, the stage for a new, popular interest in the role of the photographer was set by Michelangelo Antonioni's 1966 dramatic thriller, *Blow-Up*. Photographer characters had been leads in earlier hit movies, but none had captured the youthful exuberance of the maturing postwar generation and its ambiguous social role. The main character of *Blow-Up* was a swinging London fashion photographer with a conscience, inspired by the real life David Bailey, who stumbled on a mystery (a murder?) in a public park; moral quandary aside, his portrayal thoroughly glamorized the persona of the photographer in the popular cultural imagination.

Coincidentally, Japanese 35-mm single-lens reflex cameras with interchangeable lenses—fast, light, and forgivingly able to deliver on the candid approach to subject matter—began to invade the US camera market as international imports boomed and prices plummeted even as the quality of cameras rose. (Prewar, the small rangefinder 35-mm German Leica was introduced in the United States in the 1930s, but it was expensive and harder to use than the midformat handheld cameras then favored by professionals and amateurs alike.) Black-and-white 35-mm film was cheap and relatively easy to process; darkrooms were available in college art departments and local YMCAs. Even 8 x 10 paper (few photographers made bigger prints then) was affordable. "Handheld" was the watchword and the *ka-chunk* of single-lens

reflex shutters became the soundtrack of daily urban life.

Simultaneously, in the museum world two American exhibitions effectively launched the art world of photography. In 1966 the George Eastman Museum curator Nathan Lyons organized *Toward a Social Landscape* in Rochester, New York, to showcase a new documentary style that relied heavily on a spontaneous "snapshot aesthetic."[13] A year later the Museum of Modern Art curator John Szarkowski reprised some of the same photographers in his eye-opening *New Documents* exhibition. They included the still relative unknowns Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Garry Winogrand, whose distinctive confrontational style of observation set a new tone for working with a camera in the public square.

The Witkin Gallery opened in New York soon after, in early 1969, a mainstream, welcoming space devoted exclusively to photography. The first show debuted Scott Hyde, George Krause, Duane Michals, George Tice, and Burk Uzzle. These exhibitors were cameramen (not so many women) who reflected the postwar aesthetic disseminated by Robert Frank a decade earlier and were still working on the edges of the art world. The eponymous Marge Neikrug, Marcuse Pfeifer, and Scott Elliott Galleries, among others, came next in New York, followed by Light Gallery, all on the East Side, where art collectors flocked.

At the same time, the baby boom demographic—Americans born in the decade after World War II—achieved its hegemony. This Woodstock generation dominated popular culture through sheer numbers and purchasing power and demanded attention in virtually every artistic field, especially photography. The medium had always had a large hobbyist following; university journalism departments produced news photographers; independent schools taught commercial applications, while photographic science was the province of technical education. But now it was sanctified by the art academy. The Society for Photographic Education, which began as an informal gathering of like-minded photography teachers and curators, incorporated as an official organization in May 1964 to meet the need for theory and a multidisciplinary approach to fine art, education, and history. Its leadership included such notables as Beaumont Newhall, Aaron Siskind, Henry Holmes Smith, John Szarkowski, Jerry Uelsmann, and Minor White. Soon BFA and MFA programs sprang up in colleges around the United States. Today the group has more than 2,100 individual members.

Into this mix waded Susan Sontag, in 1973, with her analytical meditations in *The New York Review of Books*, a series of essays published later as *On Photography*. Already a noted cultural commentator, she was ready to explain this visual cultural phenomenon as it ascended. Her observations reached far

beyond photographers; the very ubiquity of the photographic medium was made clear. No one could escape the effects, the experience of images in modern life, from snapshots to advertising. For the first time many in her sphere of literary influence began to understand how photography could be as nuanced as writing: that nearly everyone is literate, but few are writers; likewise, anyone can click a shutter, but very few are photographers. In 1980 Sontag was joined in the growing public discussion by the French philosopher Roland Barthes, whose *La chambre claire note sur la photographie (Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography)* took up the personal impact and meaning of photographs.[14]

By the mid-1970s the boom only continued with auction houses and large commercial galleries alike increasingly, deeply involved. The International Center of Photography in New York, which originated the concerned photographer memorial exhibitions of socially and politically minded images in the 1960s, found a permanent home and organization in 1974. The Center for Creative Photography was founded a year later at the University of Arizona to hold the archives of Ansel Adams; those of his contemporaries soon followed. *History of Photography* magazine launched in January 1977; the *European Society for the History of Photography* began in 1978; and two years later the Association of International Photography Art Dealers, which now has more than one hundred members, debuted its annual *Photography Show*, for many years now a prestigious five-day event in New York.

Paralleling these developments (and indeed spurred by them), art and history museums, research libraries, and archives began to reconsider their roles as collectors and stewards of the photographic artifacts in their care. Photography exhibitions—historical and contemporary—were enormously popular in all venues and brought in new audiences. Harking back to Walt Whitman's notion of a "democracy of vision" emerging photographers turned to everyday actions and common people for their subjects, reviving the pleasure of accidental discovery in one's immediate vicinity.[15] In the United States, the nation's 1976 bicentennial occasioned the National Endowment for the Arts Photography Surveys of American cities.[16] Participating artists included the well-known street and documentary photographers Bruce Davidson, Lee Friedlander, and Joel Meyerowitz, plus others who became widely known afterward, such as Robert Adam and Wendy Ewald. Photographers as different from each other as Jill Freedman and William Eggleston set independent projects for themselves in the 1970s that resulted in topical books.

Simultaneously, in the late 1960s, a parallel group whose members used photographic materials and chemistry in a variety of nonphotographic print formats blurred the distinctions between photography and other media.[17] Mid-decade, a nondocumentary thread began that later burgeoned into the

First Communion Photographer, 16th Street, 1983

"Pictures Generation." The term is used for a small, more inward-looking, self-reflective group of artists, such as Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman, who used their familiarity with the history of photography and the proliferation of camera imagery in all aspects of public life to create derivative and ironic pictures using photographic materials.[18]

Art photography was in full ascendency by 1980, when the critic John Russell asked Berenice Abbott, the rescuer of Atget's archive, about her professional practice a lifetime earlier. "Of course," she told him of her experience starting out from Man Ray's studio in 1925, "there were hardly any photographers in Paris then. It wasn't like today, when every other person is a photographer."[19]

"Today, people don't do photography like we did back then, even with a 110 Kodak camera," said a fifty-year-old Bronx man to a newspaper reporter. They were looking at a 1979 street picture of the man when he was a boy in the neighborhood. He continued, "You take a picture now and it stays on your phone. Then the phone breaks and there goes your memory. You can't hold it like a print. History doesn't exist anymore."[20]

When Larry Racioppo first began to photograph in 1970, he instinctively adopted the stylistic form called documentary, or "documentary modernism" to distinguish it from photojournalism, reportage, and propaganda. No sooner had documentary photography arisen as a method in the 1930s than it was commandeered to argue or inform rather than present an artist's perception and understanding (though it had defenders as an artist's vision, as Berenice Abbott argued in 1937: "To be documentary creatively implies that the photographer has a point of view and an objective. If his purpose is communication in a wide popular sense, he is obviously communicating content and subject matter").[21] Yet, the 1970s saw a major resurgence in the documentary style, or "creative documentary," as young photographers began to explore their immediate worlds with sincerity and wit through the lenses of their cameras. Young documentarians were also strongly motivated to record people, places, and events for posterity—partly driven by the baby boomers' sense of self-importance, and partly by a shared sense that they were participatory witnesses to a genuinely transformative time.

Racioppo's Brooklyn photographs were made in that now-decried, presumably lost humanistic spirit of capturing a scene, creating a memory, and recording history with passion and feeling for the subject. With an insider's insight and empathy, Racioppo countered Sontag's narrow, outsider's view of street photography as a dramatic characterization of the "exotic" in urban life. He also stood apart from her predilection to romanticize the voyeurism that was part of photographing the "picturesque." Rather, Racioppo's photographs are

heartfelt and warm—an unironic act of preservation. If the subjects now strike viewers as exotic or picturesque, they were not to their creator in the 1970s.

"I became a 'street photographer' long before I heard that phrase," Racioppo claims of his early 1970s motivation to take up a camera and reconnoiter, alert and receptive, the homes and neighborhoods of his youth. Likewise, Racioppo was unfamiliar with the concept of the flâneur, the observer. (One detail to keep in mind while viewing the open response of his nonfamily subjects is that Racioppo is a big man, tall and imposing. His employment before photography and while he finished his master's degree was largely physical, in construction and demolition, and he can appear beyond intimidation.) Yet his bold approach was exactly that of a flâneur and in his case a knowledgeable one as well—not an external voyeur but a generous and confident insider—as he ventured out into his old Brooklyn neighborhood, camera in hand, his demeanor open and friendly.

The weather has to be right for taking to the street to photograph—brilliant sunshine would be too harsh, but a sky with low, even clouds and a steady glow diffuses the light and disallows harsh shadows. The street photographer wants the content of the subject to be apparent on first look. Only later will viewers notice, maybe only subliminally, the interplays of form and gradation. Chiaroscuro is inherent in black-and-white photography, and design too. These compositional elements become second nature when shooting on the fly. The transitory scene will not appear again; the opportunity is here now, and never again.

Racioppo's brief early flirtation with the Roman Catholic priesthood and his idealistic VISTA work experience (a program of the 1960s War on Poverty, like a domestic Peace Corps that continues today as AmeriCorps) far from home on the West Coast had helped lay the groundwork for his new venture. Meandering toward home across the American continent he used a friend's 35-mm range finder camera and found what the old parish priests referred to as a calling. It was utterly self-motivated but entirely in sync with his American, post-Vietnam generational milieu: a restless hope for an artistic, expressive outlet for his full heart. Back on the familiar streets of his Brooklyn youth, Racioppo created with fresh eyes and a maturing baby boomer's sympathetic insights—qualities that afford all wandering returnees the opportunity to know as if for the first time their genesis. Naturally, he began to reconnect by recording the changed but familiar neighborhood life and extended Italian family around him. He recorded the familiar with affection and new insight. And he carefully logged and documented, a practice that has endured for his five decades as a camera artist, all of the photographs he has taken.

Racioppo's first photographic subjects were his tolerant family members and

Hamlet's Father and Passersby on Halloween, Union Street, 1982

their customary rituals of holidays timed largely to the calendar of the Roman Catholic Church. Parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins all lived close by. Life events—weddings and funerals—brought together more distant members. Although they had no idea how serious this young relative was, Racioppo recalled, they became accustomed to his photographing their gatherings and celebrations. These early 1970s family photographs are personal but also universal and comprise the subjects most fledgling photographers begin with because they are patient and forgiving. (Many portfolio sessions, prints, and slides of 1977's national Society for Photographic Education convention consisted memorably, of photographs of girlfriends or pet dogs, or both, though few *by* women photographers!)

Once Racioppo gained confidence in his eye and mastered technique, he felt free to act on his desire to expand his field of vision. While completing university studies he began to connect with local neighborhood life as lived on familiar streets. Places he knew were now traversed by strangers, but they were also figures he could identify with and, using his camera, memorialize. He claimed to have photographed whatever interested him, but his subjects were mostly people. Not for Racioppo in this place, at this time, was the unpeopled cityscape that would later be, as it had been for Atget, his professional domain. (In Racioppo's case, he became staff photographer for the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the largest such municipal agency in the nation.) Racioppo's 1970s subjects outside his family eventually ranged from kids playing in the street—they called him "Picture Man," which he took as "a great compliment"—to old men sitting in bars and strangers on the subway. And, always, perennially, he kept photographing his relatives in their homes.

Racioppo's first decade of photography was capped, literally, by the 1980 mainstream publication of his Halloween pictures of costumed children making their neighborhood trick-or-treat rounds.[22] Monographic photography books, by one artist on one topic, were a touchstone of the era. They reflected the heyday of the medium at a time, all too brief, when the critical factors of cost, profit, and audience were in tune. Trade publishers invested in picture books and buyers flocked to them. Yet, Racioppo put down his 35-mm camera in the early 1980s, winding down a personal creative era. Nearly a decade would pass until he took pictures again, with a bigger format and in color—a clean artistic break.

Racioppo's 1970s photography of southeast Brooklyn (which he calls, using the term from his youth, South Brooklyn) was carried out organically, rather than programmatically, in the spirit of the great American social visual documentations of the 1930s, the cradle and heyday of the documentary

modernism aesthetic. Just as artist photographers of the Farm Security Administration and Office of War Information in the 1930s and 1940s specifically and resolutely used their cameras to record ordinary American life, and later economic recovery, so Racioppo photographed the quintessential, individual aspects of his Brooklyn neighborhood. Likewise, the parallel Federal Art Project allowed its camera artists, such as Sid Grossman and Arnold Eagle, to select themes and explore them visually (when they weren't documenting work projects such as sewage upgrades and street modernizations). Through its school and the curriculum's various document projects targeting specific neighborhoods, the independent Photo League encouraged younger photographers to record familiar urban topography with fresh eyes.

A generation on, Racioppo's pictures of southeast Brooklyn, taken on his own as a newly evolving artist, resonate with the traditions of the Photo League. The South Brooklyn of the 1970s was emptying of Italian and Puerto Rican families as they moved up or out to the suburbs, replaced by newcomers making their working-class way. Racioppo's familiarity with his surroundings and ease with his subjects made street photography a natural style for his purposeful focus on the known and loved—family, neighbors, and the environment . His pictures fit aesthetically within documentary modernism, not sad pictures of downtrodden souls that many mistake for documentary, but images of joy, eccentricity, and freedom.

Racioppo's pictures also recall a vanished art of photographic practice and technical mastery of necessary equipment. The mechanical camera was small, with perhaps an electronic exposure meter inside and on occasion a long-barrel lens, which made it too big for a pocket. (They were nowhere near as tiny as today's versatile, technology-rich smartphones.) Few street photographers hung their cameras around the neck, tourist-style. Instead they carried them ready to aim via a strap wrapped around the wrist, or slung over one shoulder nestled in the crook of the shooting arm, the shutter button finger-ready.

Cameras used physical film, not the built-in, digital asset management data–driven features of today's cameras. Most street photographers used 35-mm black-and-white Kodak Tri-X Pan film—flexible strips of transparent plastic, bearing light-sensitive chemicals and with regular perforations so as to catch hold of the sprockets transporting the film inside the camera, frame by frame, from unexposed to exposed, as the photographer advanced the film, shot by shot, in front of his lens via a lever on the top of the housing. The film was "fast," meaning exposure to light for tiny fractions of a second was enough to capture highlights and shadows at relatively quick, action-arresting shutter speeds. The exposure—lens opening and shutter speed—had to be manually calculated and set, though there were standard practices. (In the

Blowing Curtain and Girl, 7th Avenue, 1975

early 1930s, young Walker Evans famously told his contemporary Ben Shahn, just starting out, "There's nothing to it; f45 on the shady side, f9 on the sunny side, twentieth of a second, hold your camera steady.")[23] Racioppo bought his film as it was sold in the 1970s, in little metal canisters, holding strips of thirty-six frames—frugal photographers could squeeze out a thirty-seventh exposure at the end of the roll.

Of course, there was no way beyond the photographer's vision and intellect to "see," after the fact of shooting, the actual resulting photograph without processing the film. Tri-X could be processed with elementary darkroom procedures, at home, with standard chemicals for developing, stopping, and then fixing the picture. Then there was the craft of finely processed, paper-based prints, rich with silver, developed in the near dark. Each chemical print brought one an adventure due to the ever-changing chemical compositional balance of developer, stop-bath, and fixer. All of these supplies were available in the local camera store, found in most big towns and city neighborhoods well into the 1990s. With today's advances in digital capture and screen-based editing tools, old photography has all vanished into history and the realm of antiquated art technologies, like the etching press of a century ago.

For most photographers, complete manual control of exposure times and apertures is a lost, and largely irrelevant, skill. The art and craft of developing prints in a darkroom is also long gone. The intimacy of Racioppo's street photography was connected with the full experience of his art, which involved the mastery of his camera and his creativity in the darkroom. The feel of his work is connected to the physical, tactile technologies he used and the habits of looking, shooting, and developing (in every sense of that term) his art. Like the Brooklyn pictured in his photos, that art is fast changing. In Racioppo's hand-produced prints is preserved an enduring world of work, worship and love, and their timeless role in human community.

Notes

1. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 55; originally appeared as a series of essays in the *New York Review of Books* between 1973 and 1977.

2. Charles Baudelaire, *Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays,* tr. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 2005), 9. See also Timothy Raser, *Baudelaire and Photography: Finding the Painter of Modern Life* (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2016).

3. Victor Fournel, *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris* [What one sees on the streets of Paris] (Paris: E. Dentu, 1867).

4. Cornelia Otis Skinner, *Elegant Wits and Grand Horizontals: Paris—La Belle Époque* (London: Joseph, 1962), xiii, 1.

5. Dana Brand, *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1991).

6. *The Walt Whitman Archive*, ed. Kenneth M. Price and Ed Folsom, http://whitmanarchive.org/multimedia/gallery.html.

7. Ed Folsom, "Whitman and the Visual Democracy of Photography," in *Walt Whitman of Mickle Street: A Centennial Collection*, ed. Geoffrey M. Sill (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 80–93.

8. Literature on Atget has grown tremendously since Berenice Abbott's *The World of Atget* (New York: Horizon Press, 1964) and John Szarkowski and Maria Morris Hambourg's *The Work of Atget*, 4 vols. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1981–1985).

9. Mason Klein and Catherine Evans, *The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League, 1936-1951* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); and Anne Tucker, Claire Cass, and Stephen Daiter, *This Was the Photo League: Compassion and the Camera from the Depression to the Cold War* (Chicago: Stephen Daiter Gallery, 2001).

10. Anatole Broyard, *Kafka Was the Rage: A Greenwich Village Memoir* (New York: Carol Southern, 1993), 7.

11. Peter Galassi, *Friedlander* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 40; Robert Frank and Alain Bosquet, *Les Américains* (Paris: Robert Delpire, 1958); and Robert Frank, *The Americans*, with an introduction by Jack Kerouac (New York: Grove Press, 1959).

12. Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz, *Bystander: A History of Street Photography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993); and Jackie Higgins *The World Atlas of Street Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) 13-87

13. For a historical discussion of Lyons's foundational use of the term, see Robert Hirsch, *Seizing the Light: A Social & Aesthetic History of Photography*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 410.

14. Roland Barthes's, *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma Gallimard, 1980); translated by Richard Howard as *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981). Barthes's friend and admirer, Susan Sontag, edited his posthumous *Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

15. Sérgio Mah, Paul Wombell, Susan Sontag, Allan Sekula, John Berger, Victor Burgin, and Roland Barthes, *70s: Photography and Everyday Life* (Madrid: La Fábrica Editorial, 2009).

16. Mark Rice, *Through the Lens of the City: NEA Photography Surveys of the 1970s* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005); and Bruce I. Bustard, *Searching for the Seventies: The DOCUMERICA Photography Project* (Washington, DC: Foundation for the National Archives; London: D. Giles, 2013).

17. Mary Statzer, *The Photographic Object 1970* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

18. Douglas Eklund, *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); and Moa Goysdotter, *Impure Vision: American Staged Photography of the 1970s* (Lund, Sweden: Nordic Academic Press, 2013).

19. John Russell, "Her Camera Now Depicts a Still Life in Maine," *New York Times*, November 16, 1980, 70.

20. David Gonzalez, "A Photographer and His Subject Reconnect, 38 Years Later," *New York Times*, July 17, 2017, A17.

21. Berenice Abbott, "Photography as Art and Document," *Art Front* (June/July 1937): 16–17.

22. Larry Racioppo, *Halloween* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1980).

23. Oral history interview with Ben Shahn, October 3, 1965, by Harlan Phillips, for the Archives of American Art New Deal and the Arts Project. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-ben-shahn-12500.

Looking toward 4th Avenue, 40th Street, 1971

Fortieth Street

Back in Brooklyn again, I lived with my parents while finishing college. Working close to home, I began photographing almost immediately.

Mailboxes, 40th Street, 1979

Family Photographs, 40th Street, 1976

View from My Bedroom Window, 40th Street, 1971

Looking to Manhattan from Sunset Park, 1971

Boys with Robot Toy, 40th Street, 1971

Watching TV in Ben's Cellar, 40th Street, 1971

Girls with 45s, 40th Street, 1971

Pete and Friends, 47th Street, 1971

Millie and John on His First Communion Day, 4th Avenue, 1971

Handball Court in the Rain, 6th Avenue, 1972

Two Women on the B Train, 1971

Two Girls with Ashes, 4th Avenue, 1971

Three Couples in the Storefront, 7th Avenue, 1974

Lucky Watching TV on Easter Sunday, 40th Street, 1979

First Communion Boy with Prayer Book, 4th Avenue, 1977

George Showing His Tattoo, 36th Street, 1977

ID Photos at Joyce Photo Shop, 4th Avenue, 1977

Closed Fruit Store, 39th Street, 1975

Doll and Fire Hydrant, 15th Street, 1973

Fifteenth Street

By 1972 inexpensive apartments in South Brooklyn were becoming hard to find, so I felt lucky to rent a small floor-through between 6th and 7th Avenues. The owners, distant relatives of my mother's, primarily spoke Italian but were very kind to me. I sometimes came home to find a bottle of homemade red wine on the stairs to my apartment.

Most of the buildings on this block were three-story wood-frame houses occupied by several generations of Irish-, Italian-, and Puerto Rican American families. Just outside my door, there was so much to photograph.

Carmella in Her Backyard, 15th Street, 1975

Zio Angelo Watching TV, 15th Street, 1974

Clothesline out My Window, 15th Street, 1977

Kids in the Adjoining Backyard, 14th Street, 1975

Running Boy (from My Window), 15th Street, 1974

Building for Sale across the Street, 15th Street, 1974

Boy in the Street with Chalk Drawing, 15th Street, 1976

Prospect Expressway at 5th Avenue, 1973

Streetscape, 7th Avenue and 15th Street, 1980

MILDRED FOOD CENTER
SELF SERVICE

Conga Players, 7th Avenue, 1977

Outside Al's Grocery, 18th Street, 1975

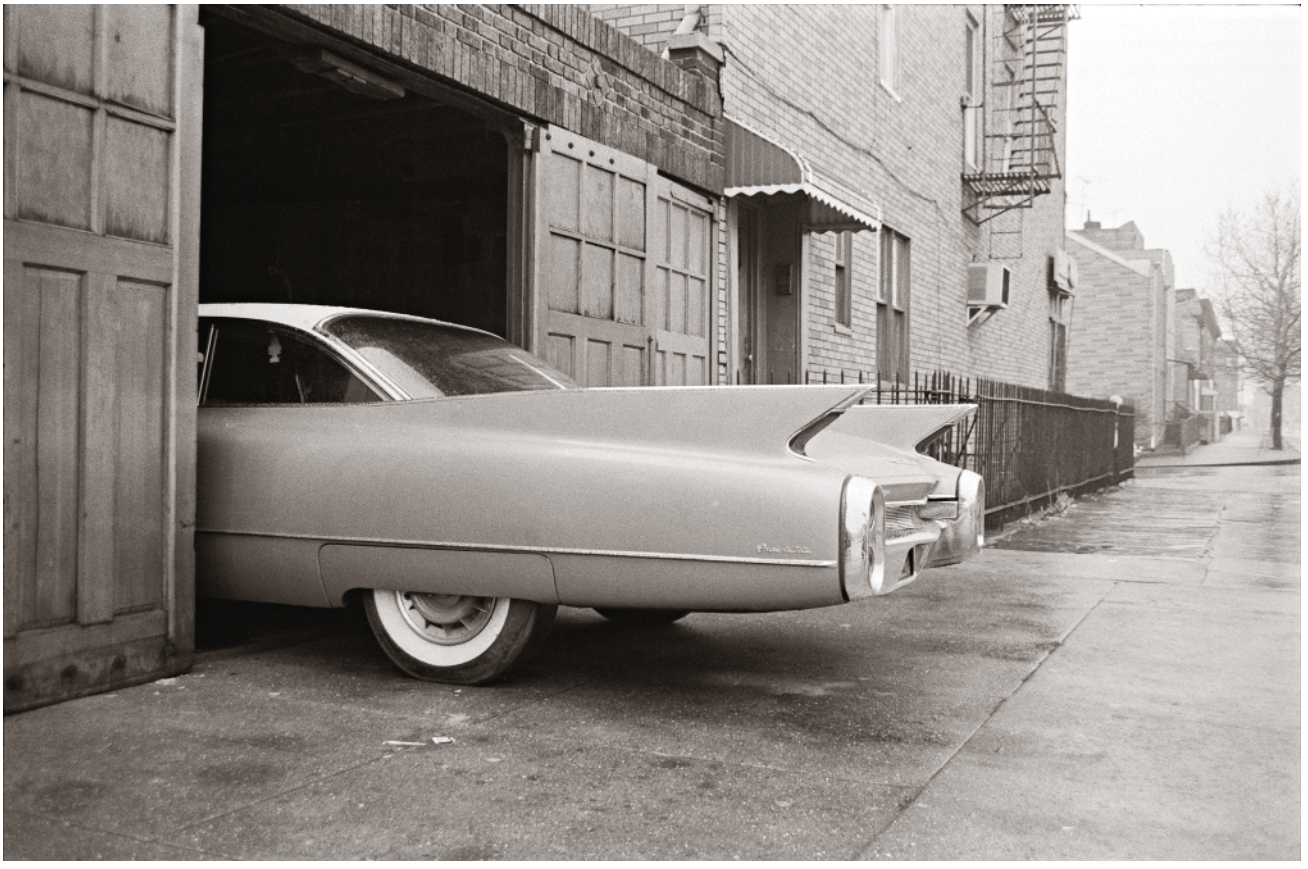
Excited Boys on Halloween, 15th Street, 1974

Playing Punchball near the Ansonia, 13th Street, 1977

Nick the Barber, 5th Avenue, 1973

Street Mechanic, 15th Street, 1977

Kitty's Dresser, 6th Avenue, 1979



John's Caddy, 6th Avenue, 1975

Brooklyn Monument Company, 25th Street, 1977

Horse and Fruit Wagon, 5th Avenue, 1974

Handball Court with Graffiti, 24th Street, 1976

Bar & Grill, 6th Avenue, 1975

Closed Luncheonette, 6th Avenue, 1975

Saxophone Player and Young Girl, 11th Street, 1977

Young Man with a Boom Box, 18th Street, 1980

Boy with Zodiac Sign Jacket, 5th Avenue, 1975

Dog Walker in a Vacant Lot, 16th Street, 1975

Changes

This site at 5th Avenue and 16th Street, the former home of the NYPD's 72nd Precinct Station House, was a vacant lot when I photographed it in 1975. Eventually it became a municipal parking lot and is now home to a Special Needs housing project developed by NYC's Department of Housing Preservation and Development. First vacant lots, then parking lots, and now gas stations have disappeared from my old neighborhood in the wake of the housing boom.

Boys Playing Baseball in a Vacant Lot, 20th Street, 1974

Halloween Trick-or-Treaters, 6th Avenue, 1975

Boy Walking through a Vacant Lot, 13th Street, 1981

Boy in Front of a Gated Storefront, 5th Avenue, 1974

Boys with Guns, 18th Street, 1971

Sisters in Front of Their House, 15th Street, 1975

Bart and Jackie in the Backyard, 36th Street, 1977

Record Shop and Restaurant, 5th Avenue, 1977

American Flag Wall Painting, 12th Street, 1978

Boys Playing Handball, 21st Street, 1975

Kids Playing in an Abandoned Car, 10th Street, 1973

My Mother and Her Sisters, 18th Street, 1971

John and Michael, 16th Street, 1980

Two Boys with Bikes, 24th Street, 1976

Girl and Boy on Their Bikes, 21st Street, 1971

Boys with Homemade Go-Cart, 15th Street, 1977

Boy with Toy Rocket and Leaves, 12th Street, 1975

St. John's Altar Boy, 21st Street, 1975

Tessie at Her Laundry Door, 6th Avenue, 1975

"Beat the House"—St. John's Auditorium, 21st Street, 1977

Uncle Sam, Memorial Day Parade, 5th Avenue, 1976

Kitty and Lucky in Their Doorway, 6th Avenue, 1972

Street Hockey Players, 18th Street, 1974

Teens and “Italian Power” Graffiti, 12th Street, 1977

Girl and Playground Swings, 6th Avenue, 1976

IS YOUR
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87
101
MARY

PICTURE HERE? COME IN!!!!!!
OME IN AND GET IT!!!!!!
Kodak
instant
print film

Boy in a Skull Mask on Halloween, 13th Street, 1978

Previous page: Photographs in Photo Store Window, 5th Avenue, 1979

God and Country

Religion, patriotism, and family were intertwined in South Brooklyn. I photographed expressions of them, both public and private.

Girls in May Day Procession, 21st Street, 1975

Classroom, St. John's Grammar School, 21st Street, 1976

Interior, Diamond's Bar, 9th Street, 1976

Laundromat at Night, 7th Avenue, 1974

Boy with Slingshot around His Neck, 24th Street, 1976

Family on Their Stoop, 11th Street, 1974

Tumbling Boy and Horn Player, 6th Avenue, 1973

Girl “Fishing” from Her Window, 15th Street, 1976

Three Girls in Front of the Sanders Movie Theater, Prospect Park West, 1976

Teens in Front of Pyramid Painting, 21st Street, 1976

View from the Back of the Funeral Parlor, 4th Avenue, 1971

Barbershop Interior at Night, 7th Avenue, 1975

Woman and Two Girls, 12th Street, 1977

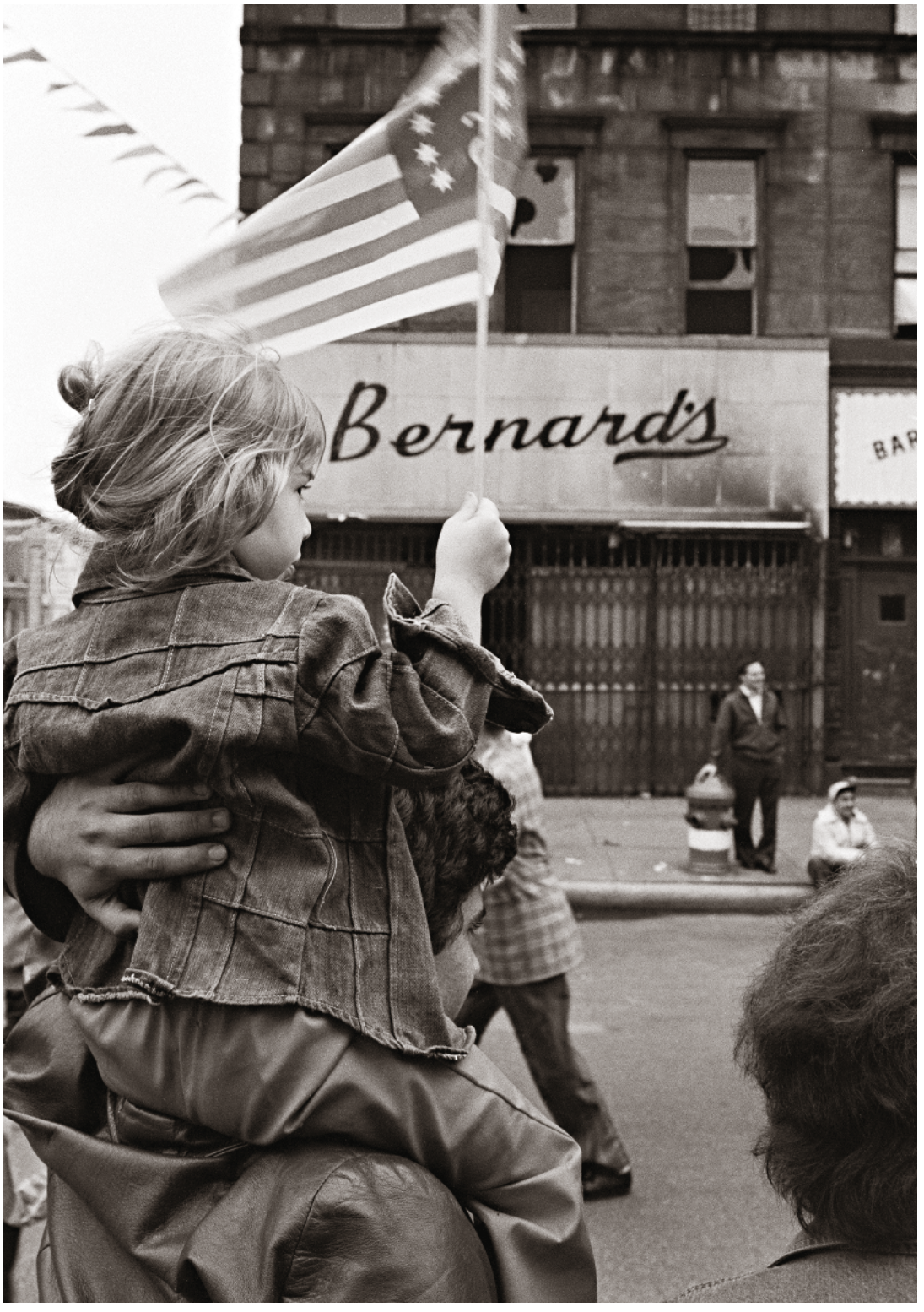
Boy with a Paper Bag, 15th Street, 1974

Family on Easter Sunday, 6th Avenue, 1974

Young Couple, 15th Street, 1976

Children on a Break from Pentecostal Church Services, 7th Avenue, 1979

May Day Procession with Statue, 22nd Street, 1975



Girl with Flag on Memorial Day, 5th Avenue, 1976

Country and God

Although South Brooklyn was changing, daily life remained fundamentally the same. Adults went to work and to church, their children went to school and played in the street. And I kept walking and photographing.

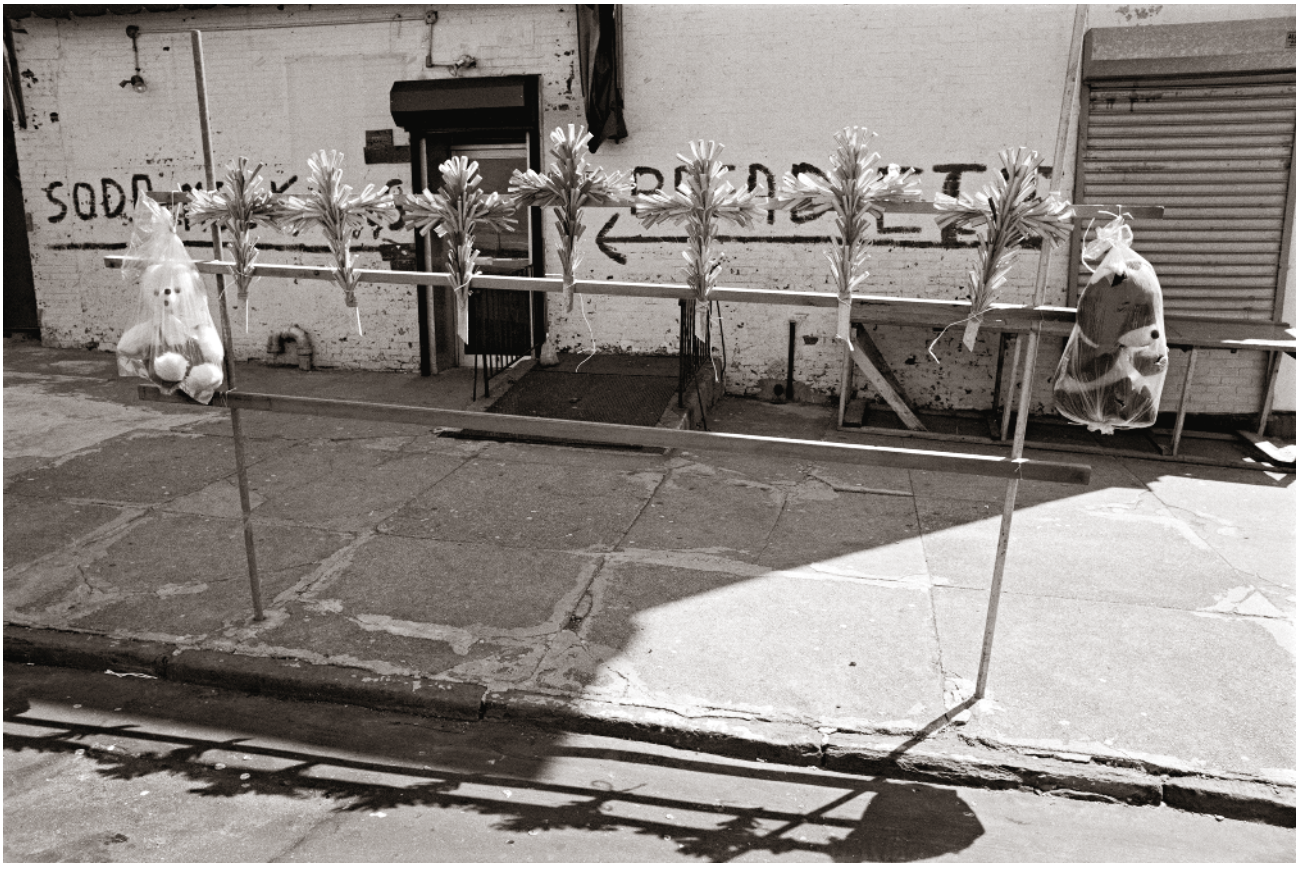
Young Witch on Halloween, Prospect Avenue, 1976

Boy with 3D Jesus Picture on May Day, 21st Street, 1975

Pinning Money on a St. Anthony Statue, 5th Avenue, 1977

Woman at St. Patrick's Day Parade, 14th Street, 1978

Good Friday Procession and MTA Bus, 5th Avenue, 1978



Palm Sunday Crosses for Sale, 10th Avenue, 1979

Penitentes, Herod, and Other Participants, Good Friday Procession, 5th Avenue, 1981

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FARMER'S
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Men Watching the Memorial Day Parade, 5th Avenue, 1976

Michael on His First Communion Day, 16th Street, 1980

Clothing Store Window at Night, 5th Avenue, 1975

Marilyn on Her Wedding Day, 6th Avenue, 1978

Two Girls in Prospect Park, 1972

First Communion Boy, 21st Street, 1983

Girls in First Communion Dresses, 15th Street, 1975

Boys at a Street Fair, 13th Street, 1976

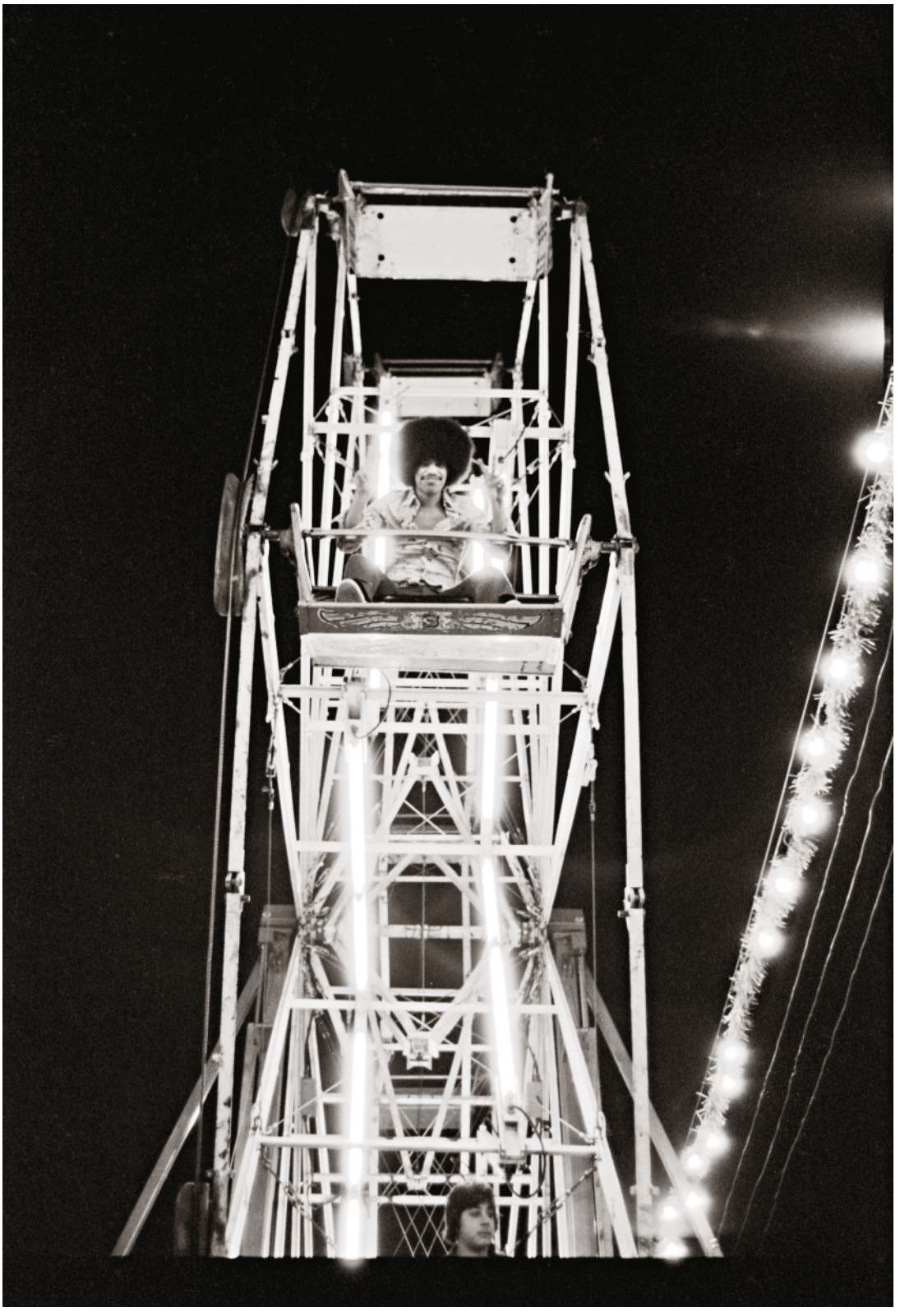
Victim and Mugger at Halloween Party, 21st Street, 1980

Previous page: Good Friday Procession Participants outside St. John's, 21st Street, 1979

Girl with Cotton Candy at a Street Fair, 4th Avenue, 1974

Ticket Booth, Sanders Movie Theater, Prospect Park West, 1974

Bridal Shop at Night, 5th Avenue, 1971



Man on a Street Fair Ferris Wheel, 4th Avenue, 1974

Acknowledgments

I dedicate this book to my wife, Barbara Cannizzaro, without whose love and counsel I truly would be lost, and to all the Racioppo and Tenga family members, both here and gone, who appear on these pages.

New Year's Day Dinner Toast, 6th Avenue, 1977

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Biographies

Larry Racioppo was born and raised in South Brooklyn, and he has been photographing throughout New York City since 1971. A former VISTA volunteer and participant in the CETA Artists Project of New York City's Cultural Council Foundation, Larry had his first solo exhibition in 1977 at Brooklyn's f stop Gallery. In 1980 Scribners published his first book of photographs, *Halloween*.

From 1989 until 2011, Larry was the official photographer for the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, hired to document the city's rebuilding of distressed neighborhoods, from Bedford-Stuyvesant to Harlem to the South Bronx. After receiving a Guggenheim Fellowship in photography in 1997, Racioppo took a leave from the HPD to work on a series of personal projects, including *Forgotten Gateway: The Abandoned Buildings of Ellis Island*, a traveling exhibition of his photographs that originated at the National Building Museum in Washington, DC.

The New York State Council on the Arts, the Queens Council on the Arts, and the Graham Foundation have supported his work. In 2006 he was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts Extraordinary Action Grant for *The Word on the Street*, an exhibition at the Museum of Biblical Art in New York. Racioppo's photographs are in the collections of the Museum of the City of New York, the Brooklyn Museum, the New York Public Library, the Brooklyn Public Library, El Museo del Barrio, and the National September 11 Memorial & Museum.

He lives in Rockaway, NY, with his wife, interior designer Barbara Cannizzaro, and their dog, Juno.

Tom Robbins reported on New York City for more than thirty years for the *Daily News*, the *New York Observer*, and the *Village Voice*. "Cellblock Justice," his series on violence in New York prisons, produced in collaboration with The Marshall Project and the *New York Times*, was named a 2016 Pulitzer Prize finalist for investigative reporting and won the 2016 Hillman Prize for

Newspaper Journalism. He teaches investigative journalism at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism.

Julia Van Haaften is a consultant on photography and museum collections. She has written widely on photography history and curated a score of exhibitions. Her biography of the photographer Berenice Abbott was published in early 2018 by W. W. Norton. Van Haaften was the founding curator of the photography collection at the New York Public Library, from 1980 to 2001, before joining its Digital Library Program. She served as director of collections at the Museum of City of New York from 2005 until her retirement in 2010.